**PH 210 American Philosophy - Final Paper topics**

* Each essay should be approximately 7-8 pages (double spaced, 12pt font).
* **Remember, you may develop your own topic in collaboration with me.**
* While creativity and new sources are welcome, your paper should show familiarity with the material covered on the course.
* Please remember to cite all your sources and give page numbers for quotations.
* The best papers will feature independent research that makes use both of the assigned reading and additional material from the library or online, which shows evidence of independent thought and research.
* For examples of some ‘model papers’, see Blackboard.

The grading of written work will be based upon the following factors:

(1) Accuracy of information provided

(2) Thoroughness of understanding and information provided

(3) Clarity, intelligibility, consistency, coherency of formulation

(4) Fairness in the presentation of the issues

(5) Explicitness of analysis, i.e., show the reasoning by setting forth the details of the arguments or reasons for an evaluation

(6) Independence of thinking in analysis and evaluation, by working to develop a particular or original point of view.

As a general guide: students are assessed in terms of whether they are well-informed about the matters considered (1-2), whether their analysis is fair, clear, and orderly (3-5), and show proof of engaging in independent reflection upon and critical evaluation of the material (6).

**Paper topics:**

1. Transcendentalist Elizabeth Palmer Peabody wrote in her 1858 piece "Egotheism, the Atheism of To-Day" (reprinted in 1886 in her Last Evening with Allston):

*“. . . when faith stagnates in the mere affirmation of the spiritual, men deify their own conceptions; i.e., they say that their conception of God is all that men can ever know of God. In short, faith commits suicide . . . at the summit of the moral life, and the next step to this is necessarily EGOTHEISM, which denies other self-consciousness to God than our own subjective consciousness; — not recognizing that there is, beyond our conception, inconceivable Power, Wisdom, and Love, — of the immanence of whose substantial being within us our best conception is but a transient form. Thus Egotheism, in the last analysis, is Atheism; and we find this "latest form of infidelity," as the understanding has rather blindly denominated it, — though not without a degree of religious instinct, — in the science, philosophy, and politics of the age, — at once glorifying it and saddening its poetry; — for man proves but a melancholy God."*

Is Miss Peabody's criticism applicable to ideas expressed in Emerson's and Thoreau’s work? How might Emerson or Thoreau defend their view of religion against such charges of ‘egotheism’, ‘atheism’ and ‘melancholy’?

1. Outline the disagreement that emerges between Clifford and James in “The Ethics of Belief” and “The Will to Believe.” How does James attempt to defend religious faith? Under what conditions does it fit the pragmatist conception of valid belief? Finally, critically discuss James defence? Does he give us a viable conception of religious faith? Is it a religious faith worth holding?
2. Compare and contrast C.S. Peirce’s and William James’ accounts of pragmatism. In what ways does James build on Peirce’s earlier accounts of knowledge and belief formation? And what new ideas or approaches does James introduce? What criticisms or objections might Peirce make about James’ account? And which do you find more convincing and why?
3. Explain William James’ view of religion. Under what conditions, according to James, is religious faith defensible? What criticisms might be made of James’ attempt to reconcile science and religion? For example, what aspects of religion are lost in adapting James’ position?
4. How did William James approach morality? What does he mean by ‘A certain blindness in human beings’? Critically assess the significance of James’ idea here. What are its implications for the way we understand morality and ethics?
5. “Traditional” education is a one-way transmission of a codified body of knowledge from teacher to student. If Dewey’s ideas were implemented, how would it change your education? Develop your argument, where appropriate, with reference to Dewey’s accounts of the intelligent method, experience, habit, impulse, morality, etc
6. What criticisms does Dewey offer of traditional ideas of art and aesthetics? Evaluate the accuracy and success of these criticisms. What alternative picture of art and aesthetic experience does Dewey offer? How convincing is his account? Support your answer with quotations and textual analysis where appropriate.
7. In Art as Experience, Dewey makes a distinction between ’mere experience’ and ‘an experience’. What exactly is this distinction and what is its significance? Is Dewey argument here convincing? What are the advantages and disadvantages of thinking about aesthetics in this way?
8. Why, according to John Dewey, does Philosophy need recovery?  What, according to him, is so groundbreaking about Pragmatism? Critically evaluate the claims Dewey makes. Is his criticism of traditional methods and goals in philosophy valid? Why or why not? Illustrate your answer with reference to other philosophers were appropriate.
9. How does Dewey understand democracy? How is Dewey’s account of Democracy different from other definitions or accounts of democracy? Assess the value of Dewey’s notion of democracy – its strengths and its weaknesses.
10. Discuss similarities between Dewey, Thoreau, and President Obama. Citing textual sources where appropriate, outline what ideas of Dewey resemble or purposefully contrast those found in Thoreau; and in what ways if any does Obama’s rhetoric or policy announcements convey the ideas or values associated with either Dewey or Thoreau?
11. Critically compare and contrast the ideas of Charles Darwin (especially in the Origin of the Species) and John Dewey. What ideas found in Dewey can be traced to Darwin’s work? Is Dewey successful in adopting Darwin’s ideas to areas like morality and forms of social organization? Give reasons for your answers.
12. Drawing on all of the thinkers that we have covered on the course, critically evaluate Pragmatism as an intellectual movement. What criticisms of both existing society and philosophy did it bring? What were its successes? And what were its excesses or failures?